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AUTHOR Phillips, Shelley
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ABSTRACT

After introductory material focusing on the nature of children's awareness of nuclear weapons, the anxieties of preschool and school age children are described. Topics discussed include fear of the bomb, fear of loss of family members, level of cognitive development and understanding of nuclear processes, and helping younger children cope. Adult defences against nuclear threat are pointed out prior to a discussion of the responses of adolescents and youth to nuclear threat. Specific attention is given to youth's changing attitudes toward nuclear threat, defending against anxiety, living without a sense of future, inability to identify with helpless role models, cynicism and learned helplessness, and the preemption of developmental tasks. Concluding remarks deal with the role of the family as a supportive buffer protecting children from psychological damage by outside threats and, briefly, the role of the school in providing instruction concerning issues related to nuclear war. A short bibliography concludes the report. (RH)

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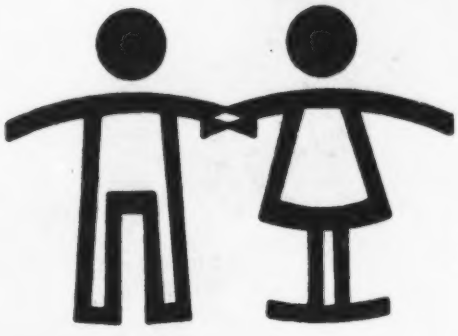

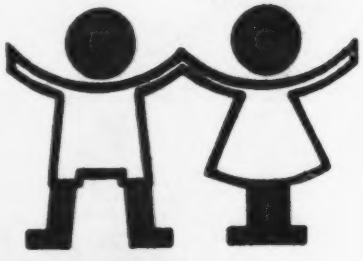

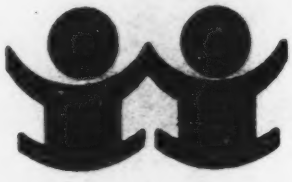

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CHILDREN'S & YOUTH'S ANXIETY ABOUT NUCLEAR THREAT

by Dr Shelley Phillips

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CHILDREN'S & YOUTH'S ANXIETY ABOUT NUCLEAR THREAT

Dr Shelley Phillips
Honorary Director Foundation for Child and Youth Studies

INTRODUCTION

Children's Awareness of Nuclear Weapons

In our society, just as most parents and adults are unaware of children's anxiety about death and avoid discussing the topic with them, under the mistaken impression that they do not think about it (Phillips,1980), so they seem unaware of children's anxieties about nuclear war. Yet the research indicates that primary and secondary children know of nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war. Beardslee and Mack (1982) found that a large number of primary children and adolescents become aware of nuclear weapons before the age of 12 and that first awareness of nuclear weapons is found in the early childhood years.

Linda Cockburn (1985) visited Hampstead Primary School in New Zealand and found that 7-10 year olds described the nuclear bomb as follows:
'The nuclear bomb is 10 times as strong as the one that fell on Irashima'
'There are computers inside the little shell of the warhead and when it hits the ground it blows up and makes all the radiation stuff'.
'If the Americans and Russians drop too many bombs the world will go funny and we will have an ice age'.
'The United States have got so much nuclear bombs they could destroy the world 32 times'.

We tend to keep nuclear discussion away from young children, in particular, in school and family on the grounds that they are too young to comprehend it. This is a strange objection considering that young children have some horrible and even distorted images about the dangers. Schwebel in a recent study (1982) found younger children more fearful than older adolescents of nuclear plant accidents. Nor should one conclude that because primary and pre-school children are less well informed and prone to magical solutions they are less frightened. For example radioactivity is an abstract concept, the precise nature of which is beyond the preconceptual thinking of preschoolers and one finds these younger children stating : 'We'd probably have to run fast to stay ahead of the radioactivity', or ' We should kill it. We should shoot it with a shot gun'.

Slightly older children in the Cockburn interviews (1985) were a little better informed and replied in answer to the question, 'Do you think people are scared of nuclear war and are you?'
'When the bomb goes off and when it hits the ground, the radiation is blown by the wind and into your body and you get sick and die.'
'Radiation kills all things, um, I'd be scared of the bomb 'cos

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it could blow us to pieces'.

In American studies, as well as others from the Soviet Union (Chivian, Mack & Waletzky, 1983), children indicated that they'd learnt about nuclear weapons from television and from school. T.V. documentaries portraying the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were particularly memorable for them. Children reported their awareness of nuclear weapons in affective terms of fear and horror.

The New Zealand children had also obtained most of their information from television, or, in some cases grandparents, and to a lesser extent from parents. They described what they'd do if they heard on the radio that a nuclear bomb would drop on their country.
'I'd rush home and kill myself'.
'I'd commit suey-side'.

One should also remember that there are children on both sides of the Iron Curtain and that they are similarly affected. Chivian, Mack and Waletzky (1983) reported that 98.6 percent of Soviet children were either worried or very worried about nuclear war, while 58.2 percent of American children were.

THE ANXIETIES OF PRE-SCHOOLERS AND SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

Fear of the Bomb

'When I watch films or listen to the radio, I can imagine immediately how bombs will fall on my village. And sometimes I cover myself with blankets because I'm afraid', said one little girl from the Soviet Union. (Chivian, Mack & Waletzky, 1983).

Most of the research indicates that children are afraid of the horrible power of nuclear weapons. In children these fears may be even more disturbing than they are for adults because they are intermingled with notions of what the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, described as 'immanent justice' (1965). This is evidenced when young children interpret many accidental events as automatic punishment for wrong doing. For example, most pre-school children will argue that if a boy stole some apples and walked over a wooden bridge which suddenly broke, causing him to fall into the water, the event was not due to chance. The boy was being punished for wrong doing (Piaget, 1965).

During World War 11, the fear of exploding bombs by children as punishment for bad acts was commented upon by Freud and Burlington (1944). They also found that young children feared the arousing of their own aggressive impulses during bombing raids, as aggression is typically punished by parents.

According to Piaget, there are several characteristics of thinking in the pre-school years that influence the perception of fears. These include confusion of reality, dreams and fantasy; the investment of lifelike qualities in inanimate objects; non scientific notions of cause and effect; a belief in the omnipotence of adults and parents coupled with feelings of helplessness and an inability to influence what is happening to them..

Young children's fears of nuclear war reflect these developmental characteristics. Children may believe that Star Wars characters and technology are real, and that a Darth Vader could step into his spaceship, fly above their house, disintegrate it with his laser beam, and take off into hyperspace. They may worry that nuclear war heads themselves will get angry and try to find someone to blow up. They could imagine a bomb under their bed or in their closet, or they could fear that they themselves could cause a nuclear war by misbehaving. (Myers-Walls & Fry-Miller, 1984).

Fear of Loss of Family Members

One of children's major fears about nuclear war is loss of family. Children in the best of situations and families fear the loss of family and support, and a study by Murphy and Moriarty in 1976 emphasises the enormity of the latter fear for young children. They described children's fearful reactions to the disaster of a tornado. The children feared not dying but being left without support and care. Their primary fear about disaster is that they will be left alone. This is enhanced by their feeling of utter dependence on adults.

Soviet children reported : 'We can't imagine life without our parents, friends, brothers and sisters, relatives.' (Chivian, Mack & Waletzky, 1983, p.6.) In the same study an American child responded that 'the death of people important to me would be too great a thing to bear.'

Older children in the New Zealand school were concerned about protecting their pets and those to whom they owed responsibility.
'I'd collect all my family, including my pure white kitten, and I'd say whoever wants to die go hide under your bed and those who want to live come with me and catch the next plane.'

Level of Cognitive Development and Understanding Nuclear Processes

It should not be assumed that primary school children will cope with fear better than pre-school children or that they will not be subject to irrational concepts. Full understanding about nuclear processes and their effects involves an ability to think abstractly, not normally reached until late adolescence, and, in large sections of the population never, which may explain why many concrete thinking adults, including politicians and military advisors, have such difficulty in fully comprehending the substance and consequences of aggressive nuclear escalation.

Conventional bombs convey very concrete images: charred ruins, corpses, maimed survivors. An intangible such as radiation however, which cannot be seen, heard, smelt or touched, and, whose effects may be delayed for months, years, or decades is too abstract for primary school children at the concrete level to understand fully. This is why they turn it into tangible horrors and punishment and this is why it is important for parents and schools to answer younger children's questions about the nuclear threat.

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Older children and adolescents who grew up in the nuclear age differ from previous generations in their concept of the universe and this probably makes it possible for them to be more realistic than adults about the effects of nuclear war. For example their perception of space is not like that of their parents. They automatically include other planetary systems and reckon distances in light years. A total void is within the realm of what is possible to them (Escalona, 1982). Thus the void that nuclear war would leave and its effect on plant life and the entire ecology is better understood by adolescents than their parents. What to their parents are abstractions are immediate physical reality to them.

Helping Younger Children to Cope

One of the most important steps an adult can take to help children cope with their fears about nuclear war and accidents is to listen to their questions, talk sympathetically at a level of comprehension suitable to the child and not go beyond the information they request. Overburdening them beyond their level of questioning may be self defeating. Let them know that fear and anger about the situation is acceptable and that you feel much the same. Assure them that there are no bombs in their houses or school, that bombs do not get angry and look for someone to blow up, and that children's misbehaviour will not cause a war. Through art, puppets and dramatic play young children may and should be permitted to express their fears for this may help reduce their anxiety.

However it is clear that most adults are not employing the above measures to help their children. In fact they are not discussing it with them. Why?

ADULT DEFENCES

Adults in our society tend to treat death as an obscenity and deny it as part of life (Phillips,1980). They react similarly to nuclear threat and use powerful psychological defences such as avoidance (I don't want to think/ hear about it) or resignation (If it happens it happens) and blocking of feeling. Many adults deny the total and real horror of nuclear war and rationalise by arguing that we could win, or speak of limited nuclear battles (Mack, 1982). Denial is expressed in unrealistic beliefs about the effectiveness of shelters, anti-radiation pills or star wars.

Children's questions about nuclear war make adults feel uncomfortable just as do those about death. Yet children, as indicated earlier, are fully exposed to information about nuclear war through the media. Adults need to confront their feelings about nuclear threat before they can deal with their children's fears (Beardslee & Mack, 1982). Escalona (1982) also suggests that they need to know that their active participation in activities to reduce the threat may be one source of security for their children.

Indeed the children in the Cockburn interviews (1985) exhibited

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their longing for positive action.
'I'd go with a group of people holding up signs saying, 'Don't drop bombs 'cos it kills people'.
'I'd make a law that makes them not allowed to have nuclear bombs'.
'I'd get a special trampoline so that when a bomb hit it goes straight back up again.'
'I wish they'd tell us more about it in the news or in books or something, because I don't know anything about it and if one happened I wouldn't know what to do.'

ADOLESCENTS/YOUTH

Changing Attitudes

Schwebel carried out a study of young persons attitudes to nuclear threat early in the 1960's in the aftermath of the Berlin crisis, and found anguish, outrage, intense fear, sleep disturbances and nightmares. There was altruism and concern for others. Youth then were appalled, and thought it terribly immoral that people should suggest that the privileged owners of bomb shelters should ward off the less privileged with rifles, killing them if necessary.

A similar study was carried out by the same researcher in 1979 after the Three Mile nuclear plant accident in the U.S.A. and found a change in these attitudes. There was an emerging minority who were now exhibiting uncaring, narcissistic attitudes about nuclear threat and accidents. The following response is typical:
'Why should I care. It didn't happen in New Jersey, it happened in Pennsylvania.'

Schwebel (1982) comments that perhaps this indifference to the welfare of others reflects a wide social change in the past twenty years, evidenced by self interested disregard of others. Some young people commented on the problem:
'There's so much tension now from the uncertainty in the world, may be if there were no threats of war, people would have friendlier interactions'.
By 1979 and later, adolescents were also indicating that they'd learnt many of the defences adults used to deal with anxiety.

Defending Against Anxiety

Young people report that the nuclear threat is too terrible to contemplate; when they do think about it they feel resentful and helpless. In the face of these feelings Schwebel and other researchers find that, like adults, adolescents tend to use denial and non reality based suggestions such as :' Bomb shelters should be available for us all', or 'We're not much in danger because we'll win', or 'We're smart enough to do them in before they get us.' (Schwebel, 1982). Schwebel describes these reactions as the macho attitude and believes it is having an all pervading influence. 'They (Young people) learn to cope with life today either by living for the moment, by persuading themselves that they are on the winning side- the surviving side that is, by postponing the nuclear holocaust to a far distant future, by

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putting hope in bomb shelters, by expecting part of this country and its people to survive, or, probably most of the time, by keeping the nuclear threat out of mind.' (Schwebel, 1982).

These defences apply not only to their thinking about nuclear war but nuclear plants and their accidents. Schwebel (1981) found that older students questioned after the Three Mile Plant accident in the U.S.A. in 1979 widely expected further accidents, but at the same time believed that the necessity of nuclear power forced the community to take the risk. The following response is typical of many: 'A few hundred or thousand people getting killed would still not be enough reason to cut our energy drastically'.

There were also fatalistic responses: 'If I die, I die', or a common self centred one: ' As long as I am not in danger I don't care'.

Ten percent of the males compared with one percent of females wanted nuclear plants retained.

In 1979 Schwebel and Schwebel (1981) found less intensity of fear, anguish, outrage, less report of disturbed sleep and nightmares than they did in the 1960's. The 1979 subjects anticipated survival after a nuclear war, albeit.cancer inflicted and psychologically impaired. Thus teenagers by 1979 were resigned, like adults to the necessary evil. There was resignation and a sense of powerless ness.
Thus one must question the effects, on young people, of living with the fear of nuclear accidents, with ambivalence about the plants and with helplessness. These students in talking about the way they would like things to be in the future said: 'I don't look forward to the future;. There's too much tension, too much hassle. May be people will be nicer and won't be afraid to be involved.'

Living Without A Sense of Future

The research suggests that young people today have a sense of self and self awareness that is qualitatively different from that of youth in previous generations. For example, they lack a sense of continuing self. They lack the certainty of a future.

In previous decades a positive aspect of getting older for children and adolescents was the awareness that there would be a future. One would be able to do things that one cannot as a child. One would have opportunities to achieve. The threat of nuclear war however denies to youth that there will be a future - a world for them to live or achieve in. The world may be destroyed before they can do hoped for things.

Many adolescents report that the nuclear threat had made them reconsider the possibility of marriage and family. High School girls are frightened by the danger of having deformed babies (Schwebel, 1982). There was the ever present fear that nuclear waste would shorten their lives and the world was a less secure place to live (Beardslee & Mack,1982; & Mack,1982). Many young people are nervous and feel pressured about the nuclear situation and feel helpless and powerless about improving conditions for the future (Schwebel,1982). The following point of view is

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common: Sometimes I think that there may be no future at all. I feel just like letting myself go. Why wait.' (Schwebel, 1982)

Schwebel (1982) in the wake of the Three Mile nuclear plant accident in the U.S.A. in 1979 queried elementary and secondary students about war and civil defense. These young people said, and they said it bitterly, that in the event of a nuclear war they would have the most to lose and pay the biggest price. They would be denied a chance to live, to love, to work, to bear children, and raise a family. They would lose, they felt, the largest portion of their lives, and they would miss the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures they had hardly even begun to taste. They expressed bitter resentment against what some young people called the' old men' who have lived to old age and who control government and against adults generally for putting them in this position.

Helpless Role Models

Escalona, as early as 1965, expressed concern that the kind of adult role models encountered by adolescents in a world threatened by nuclear destruction do not help form positive patterns of identification. Young people perceive and comment upon adult helplessness, or how adults ignore nuclear issues, or fail to act to improve the situation, and how governments made up of adults worsen the situation by nuclear confrontation.

Escalona argues that such behaviours deny young people a strong reality based pattern of adult action with which they can identify. Thus they may distrust, resent and lack respect for adults who, as they see it, created the problem. One outstanding expression of this distrust, also largely rejected by adults, is evidenced in the punk movement which endeavours to reflect the violence of the adult world and shock it into recognition (Phillips, 1983). Few adults have attempted serious study of dedicated punks and the horror they express.

Cynicism and Learned Helplessness

Escalona (1982) argues that growing up in a social environment that tolerates and ignores the risk of total destruction by means of voluntary human action tends to foster those patterns of personality functioning that can lead to a sense of powerlessness and cynical resignation. She suggested that growing up fully aware that there may be no future and that the adult world seems unable to combat the threat, can render the next generation less well equipped to avert actual catastrophe.

There is ample evidence to show that personality characteristics developed during childhood are predominantly those best suited to the adaptive requirements of the particualr society and culture in which children grow. For example children who grow up in urban poverty are street wise, but fail in vocational careers because they were not trained in middle class motivation and long range planning.

Present day children are largely taught that the best way for the western world to survive is to have the biggest and the most

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weapons. They hear little about negotiation and respecting needs and wishes of other nations. They observe that people rely on well locked houses and cars. They see strong reluctance to get involved when other people are in trouble. They note that those behaviours are not especially effective. In many ways they perceive individuals and society as helpless and passive. In the persuasive media, violence and horror are major themes. In the face of it, fear, belligerence and passive, evasive withdrawal are frequent. Escalona feels contemporary adolescents lack models which will tell them they can run the world better than their elders, which was an aspect, a possibility and the vision of previous generations.

Developmental Tasks are Pre-empted

Kagan (1978) points out that in previous generations adolescents grappled with problems such as financial security, finding a job and getting on with the opposite sex. Typically they coped with no more than two or three developmental tasks at a time. One wonders about the cumulative effect of attending to developmental problems whose priority has been pre-empted by one that almost renders development a non task (Schwebel,1981). It seems that developmental problems of identity, vocation, independence and social and psychological changes are swamped by the threat of nuclear war.

Escalona (1965) argues that the danger of nuclear war undermines the adolescent's pull to maturity. Mental health workers are left with the task of helping people cope with life under conditions that give no sign of change except for the worse.

Schwebel (1981) makes a positive suggestion about the situation. It is that young people need to be trained in action oriented responses through their experience of adults behaving this way. When parents, friends, teachers, clergy and other significant adults take steps to make the world safer it helps cultivate children's feelings of security and trust and provides them with models for their own orientation toward menacing conditions in the environment (Schwebel & Schwebel,1981).

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Tizard (1984) argues, after examination of the situation in Great Britain, that we should be cautious in assuming that fear of nuclear war leads to an increase in juvenile crime, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide. She finds no such increase in Great Britain and suggests that such claims may be simply a means of lessening parental and social responsibility. Rather these kinds of problems seem to be a product of stress and violence within the family, or stress and violence in situations where children are separated from and unsupported by their families.

The evidence suggests that a supportive family can largely buffer children from psychological damage by outside threats. Young people's anxieties about nuclear war, Tizard argues, must be set within the context of their general high level of anxiety and depression which relate most to failing in school or family problems.

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This is not to say that they do worry about nuclear war, and that this does not have far reaching effects and implications.. Tizard reports a careful market research investigation in Britain in 1983 of 422 teenagers in which more than half feared nuclear war would occur in their life time. In this study, as in others, girls were more pessimistic or realistic than boys. She points out that a recent Finnish survey and a Swedish study similarly shows anxiety to be widespread. (Tizard, 1982)

There is also evidence that many young people feel relatively alone with their fears. In the Swedish study (Tizard,1984) half of the 13-15 year olds thought that adults were very little concerned about the nuclear threat and many felt angry at this lack of concern. Two thirds said they received very little or no information about nuclear issues at school, and only half had discussed them with their parents. Goldenring and Doctor's study(1984) produced very similar findings.

Nuclear Worriers. Are They Abnormal?

Goldenring and Doctor (1984) found that, although 'nuclear worriers' also worried about other environmental hazards, such as pollution, they did not differ from other adolescents in their degree of anxiety about personal concerns. What seemed to be characteristic of them was a higher degree of self esteem than the 'non nuclear worriers', a tendency to discuss the nuclear threat more often, and a greater degree of optimism that war can be prevented. Very similar findings were reported by Solantaus, Kimpela and Taipale (1984); they found that those who worried more about war tended to be high achievers at school.

EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

A number of studies have shown that both younger children and females of all ages are likely to believe that war is not justified, while older boys more often justify war in terms of political and defense considerations (Tizard, 1984).

Furthermore, while children have vivid and concrete images of war, they have fewer associations with peace, which is generally conceived in negative or passive terms. Few children think in terms of the prevention of war by peaceful reconciliation of conflicts (Tizard,1984). This is hardly surprising, since militaristic attitudes and values are conveyed to children at school through history and literature, as well as being constantly reinforced by the media. The enemy is conveyed as treacherous, malevolent and bent on world conquest or economic and political unreasonableness, unlike 'our honorable society'. Thus nuclear education is difficult and a political issue.

In school, family and society youth can be helped by discussion about the appropriateness of traditional male and military attitudes to war in a nuclear age, i.e. safety comes from having more weapons than the enemy, from being readier to use them than the enemy, and that wars using nuclear weapons can be won. Finally we need to challenge the widespread belief that nuclear policy is outside the control of ordinary people. History does,

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after all, show that apparently powerless groups have been successful in effecting major social and political change (Tizard,1984).

Paper based on a seminar given at the North Shore Hospital, May. 1985.

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